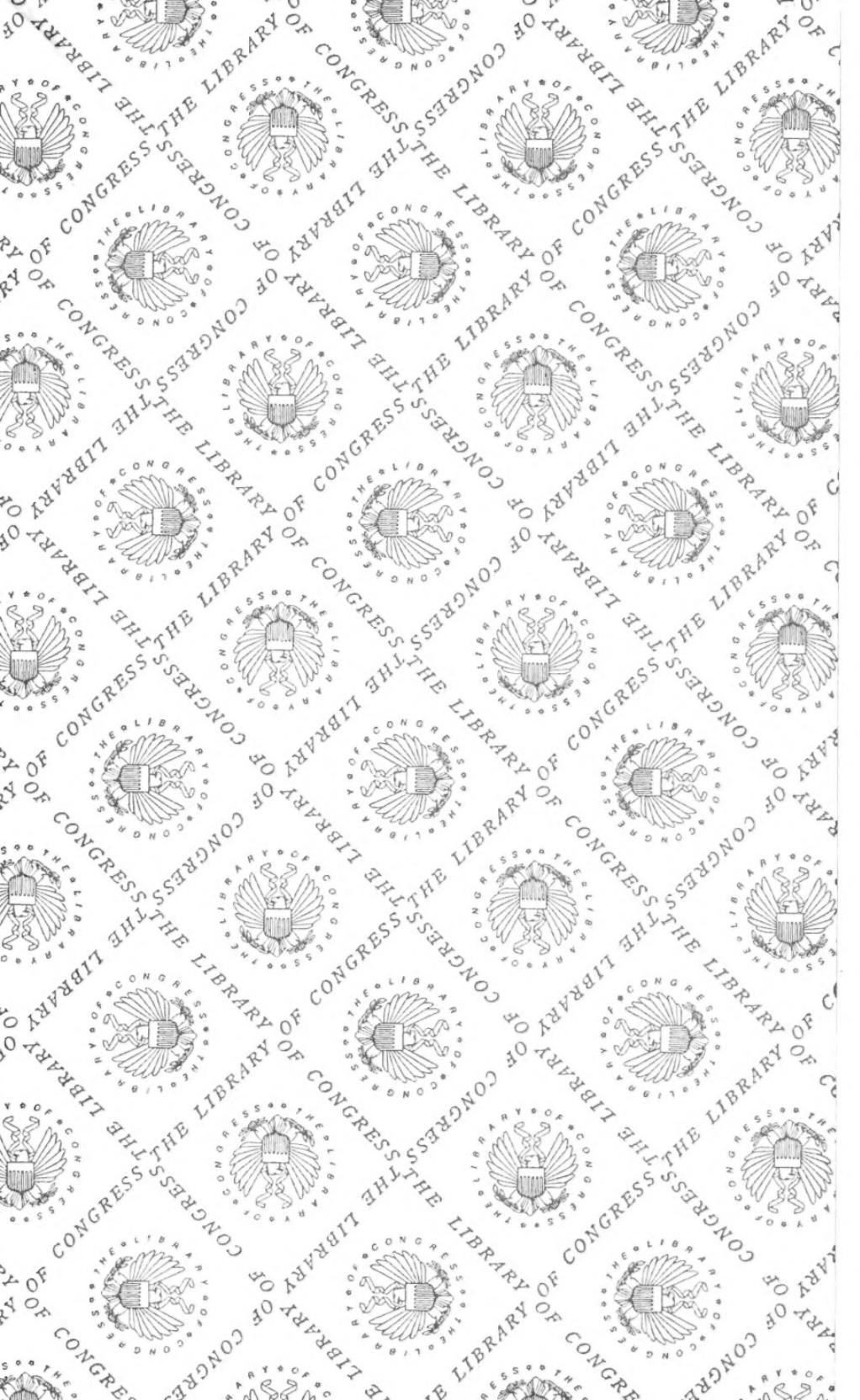
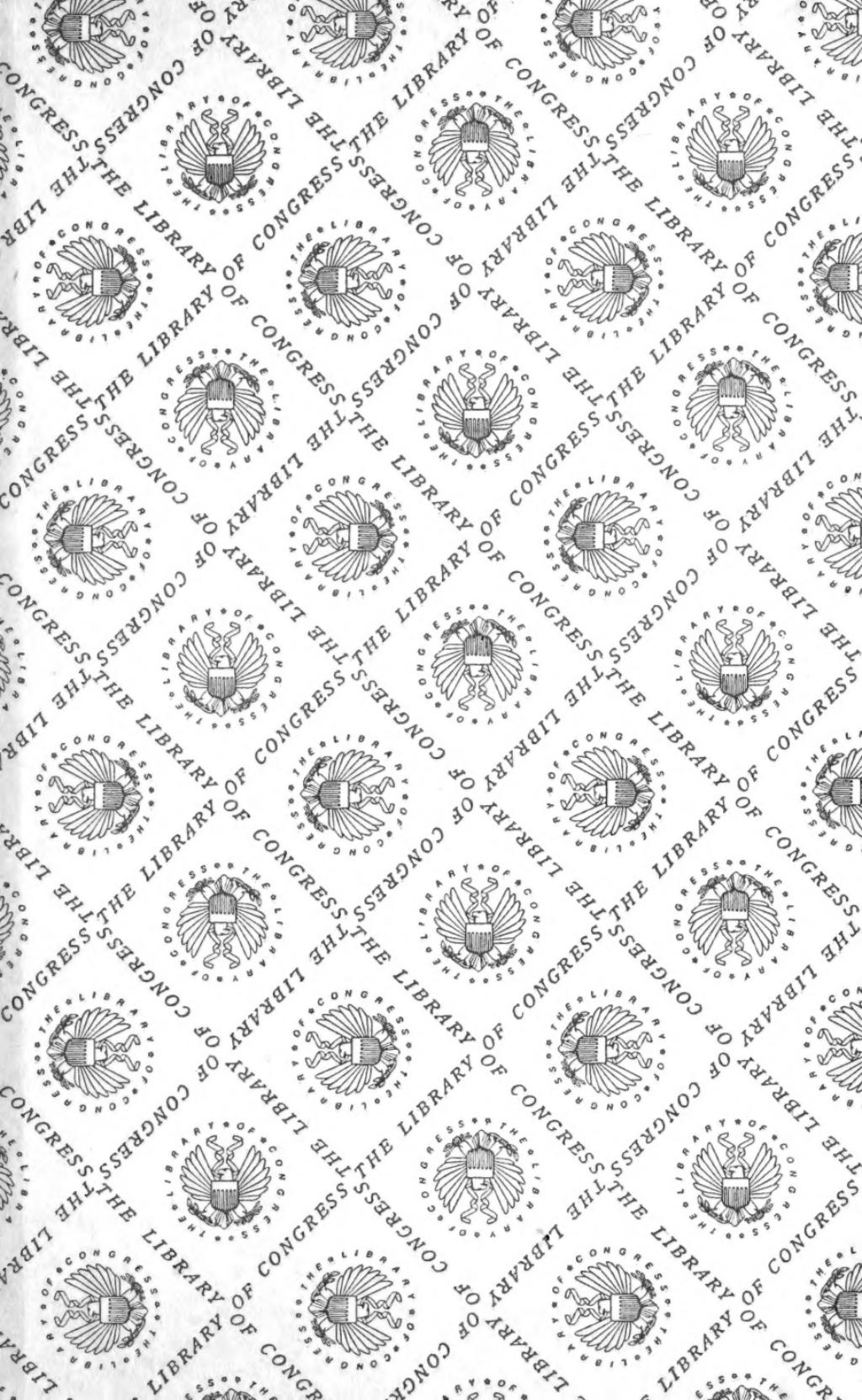


S

451

.M4 S5





'TIS SIXTY YEARS SINCE.

The Passing of the Stall-fed Ox and the Farm Boy.

BY GEORGE SHELDON.

[Read at the annual meeting of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association at Deerfield, Feb. 22, 1898.]

In giving this paper a title I have followed the Wizard of the North so far as to say "'Tis sixty years since," but for obvious reasons I shall follow him no farther. Instead of his poetic and romantic flights of imagination, I shall perforce abide in the region of the most prosaic and every-day prose.

I may be presumptuous, but my observation has led me to believe that people nowadays are interested in the smallest details of local customs and local occupations which have gone into the domain of history. In the sketch of the artist, while the period may be selected at will, the objects presented in the foreground, the middle and the extreme distance must all be on a contemporaneous plane, or the composition lacks harmony. The same is true of an historical sketch, but in a lesser degree, and while my middle ground may be sixty years since, and the perspective show considerable variation, I trust harmony will be preserved, while the principal features of one of the lost arts of Deerfield are given in detail.

Among all the industries of our town none has been more productive or made her more famous than stall-feeding oxen for the Boston and New York markets. In this business Deerfield had rivals in a few down-river towns, but no beef brought higher prices on the foot than that driven from the barnyards of old Deerfield Street. In my boyhood every

farmer was engaged in that calling and the capacious barns and sheds still remaining testify to their generous equipments for conducting the business.

Stall feeding in Deerfield began at a very early period and flourished until the advent of railroads. These brought Western competition and ruin to the business in the East. Railroads were bread and meat to the Buckeye, the Sucker and the Hoosier, but poison to the Yankee farmer. In vain the sweat of our brows and the acquired skill of generations, when pitted against the virgin soil of the broad prairies, with limitless reaches of pasture and land which needed only to be tickled with a plow to laugh corn and oats. The Westerners soon undersold us in our own markets. With the great meat staples to be had almost for the asking and the iron horse feeding on fire and water at command, the unequal contest was a short one—the king of the valley was dethroned.

In early days it was an unheard of thing for oxen to be "sent to market" which had not been through a course of stall feeding in some of the valley towns. In the fall of each year the feeders scoured the hill towns on the west and north and picked up the best specimens of oxhood to be found in the rich pastures or under the easy yokes of the farmers who reared them for their own needs and ultimately for a market in the valley

The Root of the Whole Matter.

towns. To the care and comfort of these the winter was devoted, and our farmers grew rich—as riches were then counted—in the process. Stall feeding grew to be an exact science, or perhaps one of the fine arts. Being practically a thing of the past, it will be assumed that a particular description of its more salient features may be of interest; at best, however, it must seem dry and commonplace, for it is not possible to infuse my notes with the all-pervading spirit of the times.

I have said that the winter was *devoted* to the care of the stock. This word was used advisedly and it expresses the fact. It was a devotion almost akin to worship. Nothing was allowed to interfere with the regular programme of the day. It was a cardinal doctrine of the feeders that the more comfortable and happy the animals were made the better the results. Nothing could be more true, and would that this fact were better understood by those now having the care of domestic animals. In this, humanity and profit are in full accord.

Leaving generalities we will now go to the root of the whole matter. One spring when hard times had ruled and the season had been an unprofitable one for feeders, the Hatfield farmer declared: "Well! all I have got to show for my year's work is a swearing pile of manure!" Now, whatever the feeders got or failed to get, they always got that—a barnyard knee deep with droppings and litter, and solid pyramids of excremental matter under the stable windows which were the prime requisites for raising Indian corn and peas-and-oats. These were the deposits upon which the farmers drew for future operations, and these grains, mixed half and half, and called provender, were the staple feed for fattening oxen. The winter opened with the cornhouse stuffed to overflowing—one big bay in the barn filled to the peak with hay and the other crammed with "peas'noats" in the straw.

The latter crop, peas and oats, sown broadcast together and cut with the scythe, was very bulky and stringent measures were necessary to "tread down the mow" within a reasonable compass. Man power and horse power were both used. As a boy I have been many a time up to the "greatbeams" on horse back in the operation. This was fun for the boy, but a hard road to travel for the beast who would be half buried in the straw.

There were no power-threshing machines, or corn-shellers sixty years since. All this grain, and the rye for the family bread was pounded out by the flail in the strong hands of the farmer during the intervals not occupied in caring for the stock. The "peas'noats" straw in the bulk, softened down by the flail, and the rye straw in the bundle was stored in the lofts of the cattle sheds, to be dealt out by the boys, as we shall see. The cobs from the cornhouse were carried in baskets to the cob bin, which was usually in the chamber over the kitchen. From this reservoir, it was one of the after school chores of the boys to carry great basketfuls for evening use in the big fire-place of the kitchen, which was always the center of the family circle. After a generous pile of cobs had been poured out in front of the forestick, the children were never tired of waiting and watching for the crisis when the smoking mass would finally flash into a sudden blaze, each event a new surprise and delight.

Fanning up "peas'noats" was a disagreeable process even to the dust-laden thresher, and the pile shoved up to one side of the barn floor was allowed to accumulate until there was a brisk wind from the right quarter to carry off the chaff and dust, or until the provender bins grew lean and like Oliver called for more. In either case the "peas'noats" were duly fanned and taken in two-bushel bags to the cornhouse. The corncobs now bare and broken into small pieces under the persistent flail were raked out from the golden grain and the cereals

carefully mixed. Half a bushel of corn was spread on the floor and a half bushel of "peas'noats" spread over it, and the process was repeated until the pile grew to be a grist. The constituents were then still further mixed by shoveling over the mass from side to side and then into the half bushel measure; from this it was poured into the home-made meal bag of linen or tow, two bushels to each. A grist was five or six bags for the cutter, or from twenty-five to fifty for the ox sled, and the more thrifty the farmer the better stocked in advance were the capacious provender bins. The grist was carried to the Meadow mill two miles away, where every day the busy stones converted hundreds of bushels of this mixture into provender. The miller was held to a strict account to keep his mill-stones sharp and so adjusted that the provender should come out in exactly the right condition for easy digestion, not too coarse and not too fine. This condition was determined by the trained ear of the miller noting the pitch of the groaning mill-stones, or the feel by the trained fingers of the hot stream of meal spurting from the spout, and woe to the miller if the oats were not well cut, or, on the other hand, the corn was ground into flour.

We see that the winter was not, as the poets sing, altogether a holiday time to the Deerfield farmers, especially when we add to the barn work the felling, hauling and preparing fuel fire of twenty or thirty cords of firewood each season. In all matters here treated I know whereof I affirm, being in them and of them.

In November the oxen purchased of the hill farmers were brought in small lots, or pair by pair as most convenient, from ten, twenty or even forty miles away. In due time came an operation which required all the skill and patience available. Oxen differ as much in disposition and temper as men; handling them in ignorance of their character, while under the excitement of their new

surroundings would be dangerous and might be fatal. Hence the ability to discern their moods on short acquaintance was a prime requisite, and farm boys were early put to school in this study, for such knowledge came only with years of close observation. This operation was the arrangement of the miscellaneous herd into the necessary harmonious relations for their winter quarters. This proceeding was not unaptly called by "Uncle Ralph," "seating the meetinghouse." It may not be known to all that in every herd of horned cattle, whether it be large or small, there is always an absolute grading of rank for each member. With them might makes right, brute force being the only law. The rank is based on strength or skill—in short on the fighting qualities of each. The leader is an absolute monarch. His right once established none dare to dispute. The second in rank is the one that "beats" all below the chief and so down to the weakest which must humbly make way for all the others. The monarch is often a despot; that depends upon his character. In any event if he have occasion, or makes one, to cross the barnyard he takes a bee line regardless how many of his fellows may be in his path; the others do the same so far as their rank warrants. The element of courtesy seems to be entirely wanting. We must, however, except from this charge the relation of yoke-fellows towards each other where this quality is often very prominent. Mated when young they are thenceforth, whether in labor or leisure, under the yoke or taking their food, literally always together, and they usually feel and show a strong attachment for each other. This latter fact was always noted by the judicious feeder when preparing for winter quarters.

For a stable of ten stalls, five pairs of cattle are selected and turned loose in the barnyard. As strangers, the question of rank must be settled at the first meeting and lively times follow. Every

battle is watched with interest by the owner. For the comfort of the oxen it was desirable that mates should always stand side by side in the stalls. When one ox has prevailed in every encounter and so settled his place as ruler, it was best that his companion should beat all the other eight that the pair be not separated, and when he had locked horns with a rival for the second place, a little judicious urging of the mate to his assistance, or a sly diversion on the flank or rear of the rival with a pitchfork, always in hand, usually made it seem expedient for the latter to retire from the combat and give up beaten. A victory gained the first day, albeit sometimes in this questionable manner, was rarely again contested. This process continued until the rank of each ox was established and noted. It was generally a lively time for the man as well as for the beast, since two or three contests might be in progress at the same time. Occasionally some more intelligent animal having faith in his own prowess, and realizing that he had been unfairly beaten, would rise above the demoralizing effect of defeat, watch an opportunity when his victor had nothing but his own pluck and muscle to back him, and challenge him to another combat. From the result of this contest there was never any appeal.

The necessity of ascertaining the rank of each ox will appear when the usual manner of fastening them in the stalls is understood. The stalls were about three feet wide, separated only by studs on the stable side of the manger. The studs were boarded up some two and a-half feet, and above at the height of the oxen's neck, was pinned a stout manger-pole running the whole length of the stable, to keep the animals from stepping into the manger. The manger had no partitions. Each ox was fastened by a strong rope about his horns to the stud next above him. He thus had liberty to move his head freely in every direction but one; he could not reach the ox

below him and dared not molest the one above him. It was no easy task, nor one devoid of danger to break these ten animals into their new quarters. They were strangers in a strange place, and the stalls and the fastenings were entirely different from those to which they had been accustomed. One by one, the autocrat first, the ten were inducted into their respective stalls by such kind of handling as their character seemed to call for, the essential thing being to inspire them with confidence in their new masters, and in their new surroundings. By gentleness and patience each was at length tied up in his own place, and the "meeting-house was seated." Had the dispositions of the new comers been as well known as afterwards, the task would have been much simpler. It became easier at each repetition, and perhaps within a week all trouble was over. In a short time each ox knew his own stall, and would pass by all the tempting fodder lying by his path to it, well knowing when he would find his own awaiting him.

As a rule mates were so courteous to each other that it was often impossible to find out which beat; but this kindness could not be presumed upon when arranging them in the stalls; something might occur to arouse the temper of the ruler, when if misplaced, trouble would follow; the buyer, therefore, always asked the seller, "which beats?" unless it was apparent.

Attacks of home-sickness were not uncommon among new comers, and in such cases the most vigilant watch over doors, gates and fences was necessary to frustrate their persistent efforts to escape. Once free, the exiles would make tracks pointing straight towards the home of their early oxhood, and with a fair start would get there; for the cow-boy and the lasso were not of the Connecticut Valley, and the farm horse was no match for the excited runaways. It may not be amiss to make note of a single case. One day I had

turned into my well fenced barn-yard a large pair of oxen just down from Vermont. Not long after I happened to see one of the strangers, with a spring as light as a deer, clear the top bar at a bound. The mate did not feel equal to this feat, but he proposed to show that some things can be done as well as others; so after giving one look round for a vulnerable point, he walked up to the bars, bent his head deliberately down, adjusted his horns carefully to the rails and lifted both posts bodily out of the ground, quietly laid the whole down flat without misplacing a bar and walked out over the prostrate structure. But with all their active determination and prodigious power they acknowledged the mastership of man. I had no difficulty in stopping them in a lane leading to the highway, and so saving a world of trouble to all concerned. On this display of agility, ingenuity and strength, the homesick pair were condemned to close confinement, and for many weeks were not allowed the liberty of the yard, it not being safe to assume that this first break for liberty would be the last. As a rule, however, the strangers would soon settle down to the new order of things, and make the most of this, the happiest period of their lives, having perfect rest and the best food possible to repletion. In a short time, when the stable door was opened, all would march in like a file of soldiers and take their places in regular order; they always found awaiting them a measure of the sweetest provender, or the most fragrant hay they ever ate. Thenceforth for them, life ran in easy channels, disturbed only when some of their number were sold to the drover and strangers introduced in their places. Then the scenes of the fall were gone over again. In these cases the old stock usually combined against the new comers, forcing them into the lowest ranks. Here a good deal of human nature came out. Those who had so far found place at the foot of the

herd, backed by their fellows, would revenge on the intruders their own previous humiliation, and the life of the latter was made a burden, until the love of ease in their tormentors outgrew their love of domination.

The system of feeding here was uniform. The fattening oxen were never kept in the stable except to be fed, always sleeping in the open air, their only protection being sheds opening to the south. They were "put up" at daylight and always found a savory mess in the manger. After the daily routine had become settled, they were let into the stable as fast as they could walk, and were tied up from the front; thus they were loose in their stalls for a minute or two. At such times traits of character were occasionally shown, which proved that hoggishness was not confined to the sty or to the human race. There being no partitions in the long manger, the unscrupulous scamp, seizing this momentary liberty, would stretch his neck to reach the pile of the ox next below him and would gobble up the biggest mouthful he could before touching his own, and would go on the same errand a second time if possible before he was tied up. There being usually fast eaters and slow eaters, when all were tied, the boy with his broom kept each mess as compact as possible, and each ox took his time to finish it, safe from depredation. The boy's knuckles often suffered from getting between the broom handle and the horns of his impatient customers. The provender being disposed of, hay from a narrow kench of the solid mow, and well shaken up by hand, was fed to the oxen little by little until they could eat no more. No pitchfork was allowed in this process, for fear the cattle's noses might be pricked, or the hay get into the manger in lumps, the aim being that the hay should fall as light as snowflakes on the sod, so, it more easily reached its destination. The pampered beasts were not allowed to wait a moment between feeds; if their

heads were seen above the manger, breakfast bell would ring in vain until they were all served with another batch of hay. If it should chance that some streak in the hay-mow was for any reason not quite up to standard, so that the epicures turned up their noses at it, it was not, "take that or nothing;" on the contrary, the manger was at once cleared, the contents relegated to a less particular grade, and replaced by a satisfactory quality. When stuffed to repletion, the oxen were let out to drink, one pair at a time, beginning of course at the foot of the stable; they were gently driven to the corner of the yard, where stood the watering trough brimming with water freshly drawn from the warm deep well, with the old oaken bucket. Here they were kept until they understood they were expected to take their fill. Under the new condition of things it was sometimes hard to make it clear to the dull-witted ones why they were thus held, and occasionally a pair would not avail themselves of the opportunity for a day or two. Unpleasant experience, however, soon brought them to terms, for as soon as all who would had drunk, the trough was cleared to prevent an accumulation of ice; and in a few days it became a matter of course for each pair as they were turned out to go straight to the trough and drink their fill. Meanwhile the stable was being cleared, and the next pair was waiting without impatience for their turn, as a matter of routine. When the head pair had taken their drink, they selected their camping place for the day on the clean beds of straw under the shed. If one earlier out had ventured to lie down before his betters had provided themselves, the spot he had selected was usually wanted and he forced to vacate. This condition of things was soon understood, and the weaker ones waited and watched their chance for a bed. When all were settled for their midday rest, the barn yard became forbidden ground to chil-

dren and strangers. It was a grave offence in anybody to "scare up the cattle." Access to the barn was usually through the cattle sheds, and after a little, the feeder could thread his way unnoticed, among the huge piles of beef, chewing the cud in sweet and calm content. But let his wife or daughter attempt to follow, their deference to the sex was at once manifest; at the first step inside the gate they would rise to an ox. At midday the barn was hardly more a playhouse for the children than the meetinghouse. There was no hunting of hens' eggs or jumping from the great beams on to the mow of "peas-noats" straw.

It was one of the morning chores for the boys to rake up the walks, the vacant part of the bay and the barn floor, and all the scattered hay found was put with the orts and fed to a lower grade of stock; the orts being anything left in the manger when the epicures were turned out. After the orts were taken out the manger was swept as clean as broom could make it. The barn was kept about as orderly as the kitchen, and the food well cared for. At no time were the children allowed to play on the hay mow, or indulge in the delight of tumbling in the pile "thrown down" for immediate use. "How would you like to have folks walk on your bread and butter?" was the standard query, and the keynote for all employed about the barn; and that neatness which was true economy prevailed in every part of the premises. A slovenly barn was held to be a disgrace to the profession, and clear evidence of an unthrifty farmer; waste in small matters inevitably leading to carelessness in the general management of the farm.

When the hay was put into the mow it was trodden down as solid as man and boy power could do it, as many a wearied pair of boys' legs could testify. "Mowing away" was no sinecure work, and upon its being faithfully done depended largely the condition of the hay in the

winter. The prime object was to keep the mow level while the bay was being filled, that it should settle evenly and firmly, the outside keeping pace with the center—easy enough in theory, it was difficult enough in practice. Successfully done the mow became an amalgamated mass, almost as solid as a bank of earth, the hay curing alike in every part; when fed out in the winter, the barn was filled with its grateful fragrance. The mow was cut down with a sharp hay knife in small square kenchies that the exposure to the air be as little as possible, and no more was "thrown down" than was required for immediate consumption. The fresher the hay the better it was relished by the bovine palate, the better relished, the more eaten, the more eaten, the more resultant fat—the aim and end of the whole process.

That the appetite should not be cloyed by such abundant richness, the oxen were given, about once a week, a breakfast of cornstalks, husks or "peas'noats" straw, which was received with thanks. It was a day of trouble to the feeder, when as it sometimes happened, the objects of their care declined to eat the good things set before them, owing to unfavorable weather, or, it may be, to overfeeding with provender, albeit a careful watch was always kept on the condition of their digestive organs. "Your cattle eat well to-day?" was a common query when the feeders met on change in "Dr. Charles' senate chamber." "No trouble about that long's this weather holds" was the usual response, on days when the air was crisp and the frost keen.

It was this and kindred topics which were discussed day after day at this common place of meeting,—the fine points of each other's stock, the fattening qualities, the estimated weight, the gain since put up, and above all the prospective price of beef as indicated in the weekly reports of the Brighton and New York markets; story telling was in order often at the expense of some of the hearers. It was considered a fair game

and a good joke, for one to cut in and buy upon the sly, a pair of oxen which a slower neighbor had spotted, and was leisurely trying to get at a bargain. Old straw was threshed over and over. The big ox of Col. Asa Stebbins, which was too fat to walk, and was drawn to Brighton on an ox sled, was brought out, and the Duke and Dime of Uncle Seth, which were nearly in that condition, were often canvassed; with all this, however, was a judicious mixture of narratives, sometimes rather highly seasoned, and occasionally a jovial song from Uncle Sid,—and nobody enjoyed or appreciated a royal good time better than these same hardworking farmers of Deerfield.

In due time, Dr. Charles' clock strikes two. Why is it that not one of that company is there to hear it? It is because that on the stroke of two, the cattle must be "put up." None knew the hour better than the cattle themselves, and they would be surprised and disturbed by a few minutes delay. They did not, like Washington, make an allowance of five minutes for the variation of time-pieces. Fair weather or foul, a few minutes before two, they would rouse up, lazily stretch their full length and after a series of prolonged and satisfactory grunts, get up and take their respective places in a line, with the leader at the stable door. When the door is opened the stately column marches deliberately in, each to his own stall, where he is tied in front, and the gorging begins. Nothing was allowed to interfere with putting up the cattle at the regular hour. A current story will illustrate this point. Of four brothers, prominent men of Deerfield Street, the oldest one died. There was a large gathering at the Major's house for the funeral. To this fact I can testify, for through my three-year-old eyes, I saw from a chamber window the overflow in the door yard. I did not, however, see or know about the hitch by which the services were delayed for a considerable time. When at length

the procession was ready to move towards the old burying yard, the pointers on the major's tall clock indicated the near approach of two o'clock, and "Col. Dick," one of the brothers, turned the other way towards his home. "Uncle Liff" joined the procession, but casting his eye towards the sun, saw that the cattle would be waiting at the stable door before he could return from the burial, so he left the line at his own gate. "Uncle Sid," following the example of his elder brothers, fell out as the procession passed his gate, within full sight of the graveyard. In due time the rest reached the open grave, into which the body of the Revolutionary Major was lowered; than came a pause for the usual ceremony, when some near friend of the deceased gave formal thanks to the people for their assistance in burying their dead. The pause was short. "Uncle Hinsdale," who was the conductor of the funeral advanced to the grave and with his peculiar emphatic ahem! and his accompanying kick with the heel of his right foot, sent the earth rattling down upon the coffin and exclaimed shortly "Cover him up! Cover him up! No friends here!" It is not clear whether he was the more vexed at the absence of the three brothers, or his own enforced presence after two o'clock.

At nightfall the cattle having eaten their fill were turned out with the same ceremony observed in the morning. It should have been stated that when untied in turn, the trained animals did not like school boys, make their exit pell-mell or hap-hazard; they were early taught to back quietly out of the stall, and turning to the right or left, as the case might be, to take a prescribed route at a dignified pace to the stable door and so on to the watering-trough. After drinking, they camped in the sheds for the night.

It was one of the regular morning chores of the boys to "straw the sheds" or make up the beds of the oxen for the day. The dung was thrown out, the

old camping places stirred up and fresh straw from the lofts above was strown knee deep over all. And so each day their lordships were furnished with a clean and tempting bed, which, as we have seen, they made the most of.

What I have described, was the regular routine, month in and month out, until the feeders and the drovers agreed that the cattle were fat enough for market, and upon the terms on which they should change hands. The drovers were men who made it their business to buy the fatted oxen of the feeders and drive them to the great markets. The looker on—provided he had the leisure—could find abundant amusement in watching the parties while making the bargain. Hours would be spent in examining and discussing the fine points, or the weak points in each animal, adjourning back and forth from one to another, in estimating the comparative weight and quality. If the drover found a lack in one point, the feeder would call his attention to a compensation in another. If the brisket was fine and full, the drover would think the flank too thin; if the barrel was shown to be round and plump, the hips would be too narrow; if an unusual length of the animal was noted, the drover would see too much daylight under him. To offset the broad shoulders and swelling ribs, he was found too short to weigh well; if the skin was found as soft as velvet, the rump was not well filled, or if well filled it sloped off too much. And so point by point and inch by inch, each ox was examined, handled and discussed. The subjects looked on curiously or went to their straw wondering what all this unwonted disturbance meant; often they were obliged to rise again that some material point might be settled; while the talk went on about the weight on the hoof or on the hook; the probable rise or fall of prices on the next market day, with interludes of cider drinking and story telling. Many a straw was chewed to paper stock, and many a stick whittled to a

point, many a turning of backs and facing round again, many an apparent last word and final getting into the cutter on the one side, and movement towards the barn on the other, before a bargain was made or a settled disagreement reached. Sometimes the appearance of a rival drover, looming in the distance, would add interest to the scene and hasten conclusions.

The oxen were sold at a lump price per head, or at a fixed price per hundred, dressed weight; in the latter case a settlement was made on the bill of weight brought back from the butcher. If no price could be agreed upon on the hoof or hook, the oxen were sometimes sent "on drift" at so much a head, the drover taking them to market and selling them as best he could on the feeders' account.

Occasionally the owner himself, became drover and salesman in the market. If he could not hold his own with the butcher on the final field of action, he might come back a wiser and a poorer man. The butcher preferred to deal with the middlemen, and the drovers were apt to feel their field of operations was encroached upon, so the two might combine on occasion to "roast" the intruder, both for sport and profit. Experience is knowledge at first hand, and the writer learned that this roasting process was not in every individual case a success. Moved by reasons he thought good he took his own to market. He found a townsman had been victimized the week before, and overhearing some conversation behind the yard fence between the drover, with whom he had failed to trade at home and a market butcher, learned that he also was marked for game. His blood was up and hot; forewarned, he called his wits to the front, watched each move and made his own with apparent unconcern, but in real torture and real ugliness.

Their plan was to combine and play the bear, decry my stock, declare the market glutted, that prices were falling;

and each butcher that came into the yard, would make a lower offer than his predecessor. Before noon, however, the roastee had scored a success. He had struck a man not in the ring, and sold one pair of oxen for eight dollars more than his first asking price. At sunset the clouds had passed, the unsophisticated farmer went about smiling serenely, and when he had beaten the whole crowd of drovers and butchers in "laying" the weight of a remarkable bull, his egotism knew no bounds; he went to bed counting himself the richer by a trying experience, and half a dozen unexpected ten dollar bills in his pocket, and an added confidence in himself. The aim and end of all the care and pains of stall feeding being the net cash proceeds at market, this story egotistic as it is, may fairly be considered as part of the history in hand.

But to return; whoever took the drove to market, certain preliminaries were always necessary—preliminary steps literally. The first thing was to "walk the cattle." They had been so closely confined, with almost no exercise, that without this process the excitement attendant upon being turned loose on the road, and the unwonted fatigue of the first day's journey would be sure to break them down, rendering them unfit for the week's travel. To make them more waywise they were "walked" for a mile or more out and back for three or four successive days before the event. "Walking" was the term, but not the fact. Rejoicing at their freedom, the animals always started off on a gallop, raced back and forth, dancing, prancing and cutting up all manner of capers, to the great delight of the children watching and waiting at the windows. The subjects grew more calm at each exercise, until by Sunday night they generally took it for a matter of course, as being a new phase in the daily routine.

Monday morning was always starting time for the journey to Brighton, and it

was a stirring scene on the street while the drover was mustering his oxen for the line of march, from the several barn yards where he had bought or engaged them. The windows were filled with the faces of women and children, and the street with a promiscuous stir-up of men, boys and beef cattle. As each new lot joined the drove, the scenes in the barn yard the fall before were repeated, only there was no interference in the combats, for no one cared which beat. Skirmishing and fighting for rank was the business in hand, until after much locking of horns, desperate pushing and tearing up of turf, all questions of precedence were settled and all faces were set towards Cheapside bridge. The street and roads in those days were lined with fences and gates. The first day's march ended at Grout's Corner, and a tired lot was man and boy and beast on arrival. The route was more quiet on Tuesday, and after that the victims marched as steady as grenadiers to Brighton and their destiny.

In our day when crowded passenger cars by the dozen make four trips a day between Boston and the Connecticut Valley, and freight cars deliver oxen at Brighton in half a day, it is hard to realize that sixty years since two stage lines each sending three coaches a week on a round trip to Boston, supplied all the demand for travel between this section of the Connecticut Valley and the Hub, and that a few stray white-topped baggage wagons were ample accommodations for the freight. But there was next to nothing in the way of travelling for pleasure then, summer vacations were unknown, and the day of the prolific drummer had not dawned. The passengers were generally store keepers going twice a year to Boston to buy a six months' stock of goods, ministers traveling on half-fare to convention or on exchanges, political stump speakers in their season, and rarely sisters, aunts or cousins going to visit sick relatives in city or country. Parties in sable going

to funerals, so common in the cars today, were not seen in the stage coach. There was no harnessed lightning to give notice of death, and no steam to carry friends in response. People were buried where they died, and the funeral was attended by a sympathizing neighborhood. When it was all over the slow mail carried the sad news to the stricken hearts of the bereaved.

But however slow this transit, it has carried us away from the fat ox and his exit. We will return to again see him off from the valley on his final journey, and consider in connection therewith a matter not hitherto touched upon. Behind all the Monday morning stir and bustle in starting a drove of fat oxen to market, there was often a wrench in the heart of the mother at the first long parting from an ambitious son. With tearful eyes she watched him disappear round the turn of the road, running and shouting, whip in hand about the excited oxen, he no less excited than they, and feeling his consequence as never before. For it was frequently on occasions like this that the boys of the farms took their first look into the outside world. With little or no pay beyond their expenses on the road, and perhaps a little guidance in seeing the elephant in the great cities they would go with the drover as his assistants; thus day by day, footing their bills, and their way to the metropolis. Their baggage, if any was thought necessary, was carried in leather portmanteaus, strapped behind the horns of some of the leaders of the drove, so, it was safe from molestation. Wonderful were the stories with which the travelers regaled the ears of their envious companions on their return in state by stage coach. These narratives generally bore fruit the next spring in new batches of pilgrims; and, incidentally, these trips to the city often led to ambitious aspirations, to permanent migrations, and a resultant loss to the valley.

Since among other changes in this

changing era it has come to pass and been established, that the "chief end of man" is not to "Glorify God and enjoy him forever," but to get riches or die in the attempt, this emigration to the great centers, which began about sixty years since, has become a prominent factor in the history of the Valley towns. The ultimate consequences of this movement we cannot as yet discern. Time alone can determine that. Some grounds for conjecture there may be in the fact that the one man, of the many score of adventurers, who succeeds in the terrible war of competition, is often turning his thoughts and his footsteps towards the home of his boyhood, for an old age of quiet enjoyment away from the strivings and the turmoils of the city; or perhaps more often giving of his wealth to endow libraries or otherwise enriching the social or educational life of his native town. Who can gauge the result of this reflux, or say whether it be not in the line of the great law of compensation; of one thing, however, we may be certain; much will depend upon the character of the returning tide.

But look upon this as we may, the old-fashioned farming and the old fashioned farmer are gone. The stall-fed ox has gone, and the old-fashioned boy literally followed him to the metropolis.

The boy was essentially a part and parcel of the old farm life, sixty years since, but his multifarious occupations each in its season are now nearly obsolete. In winter, as we have said, it was his duty to straw the sheds, clear out the watering trough, rake up the barn floors, sweep up the meal, tend half-bushel in fanning up, make hay tea and feed the calves, feed the pigs corn in the ear, but never from the swill pail; none but the owner himself could be trusted in preparing the chief meals of the fattening swine. He was called upon to milk the family cow, to get in wood and cobs for the evening fire, and kindlings for the morning, to draw cider for the three meals and the evening visitor. With the

opening spring to fill up the odd hours, he was set to work on the huge piles of sled length fuel in the wood yard, the bountiful result of the winter's sledding. I can testify in one case when the boy not being big enough for the axe an axe was made to match the boy. The sled wood was from two inches to two feet in diameter, the length usually nine or twelve feet, and the firewood three feet. No measure was used, but the eye was trained to cut exact lengths, and the arm trained to the knack of sending the chips a-flying and leaving a clean cut calf just half through the log. The wood saw was then unknown.

The earliest meadow work for the boy was to knock dung, clear off the flood trash, pile and burn the corn stalks. There was usually fun enough in the last two employments to disguise the work, the bonfires being often an evening's sport. Then came "driving plow," which had no redeeming feature for the tired boy slowly plodding up and down the long furrows, lazily urging the slow oxen with sleepy voice and fish-pole-like whip which he could not even crack. At each bout he looked longingly up to the hot sun which seemed to stand still in the heavens. Oh, the monotony and weariness of it! Even the night brought no relief.

"In dreams he trod the field again,
In dreams across the burning plain
His lagging legions urged amain."

The team was usually two pairs of oxen led by the family horse; often, however, three pairs of oxen and occasionally four; each addition making it easier for the beasts and harder for the boy. It was a welcome change when called to ride horse to harrow in peas and oats, or prepare the land for holing-out. The boy must drive the team when dunging out, cover dung for the planter, cut dock on the grass land, plant white beans among the corn. Watching the cornfield to keep off predators was a different thing. In this if the boy was allowed the old gun and powder horn, he found a congenial occupation in

a contest with the wily crow, his cousin the crow blackbird and the chipmuck, all of which loved the sprouting grain. When cornfields were near together the boys could congregate or watch turn by turn at will. The most vigilant watch was called for at early dawn or early twilight. If a fish-pond was near by, woe to the pickerel as he lay sunning himself near the surface. The boy reasoned well that the crow would be scared by the same shot which killed the fish. Trapping woodchucks also blended in harmoniously. Too soon came riding horse to harrow for the first hoeing and harrowing alone for the second and third hoeing.

Then it was driving cows to and from pasture before and after the day's work. In the season of berries these were often slow journeys, and many a string of black-caps on the long stems of herds grass were carried home to flavor the bread and milk; turning grindstone for the mowers, turning swaths after them, raking after and trimming up the hay-cocks, raking after cart, lugger jugs of water from the spring to the dinner tree; no ice was then used.

About the house the boy was always in demand—piling up the fuel in the wood shed, picking up baskets of chips for the dinner pot, taking a turn at the churn dasher, hoeing in the garden, weeding out the long beds of beets, onions, parsnips, etc., and as he was caught, set to picking cucumbers and beans, digging potatoes, and picking up apples, running of errands to the neighbors or the store. It was the boy's business to look after the poultry, gather the eggs, care for the setting hens, make the coops, and feed the chickens. With all this it would seem that the old-time boy could have small chance for fun or recreation; but by hook or by crook this same tough little animal found a good deal of time for amusement. Fishing and hunting; trapping or shooting woodchucks and muskrats, crows, blue jays and chipmucks; hunting crows' nests; making

willow whistles; shaping and playing five stones and mumble the peg; going in swimming, making and flying kites; making and using bows and arrows and darts and slings—it was a great thing to be able to send the cat tail arrow up out of sight—playing soldier with red flannel belts and shingle swords, in one case the son of a king being a fellow officer; playing tag and prisoners base, hide and coop, playing ball with home-made material; wicket, round ball, one and two old cat, being the favorite games. What fun on a September evening, in roasting ears of corn on the ends of flexible sticks at a burning stump or over the glowing coals in the bed of a bonfire of drift wood, or in favored places, at the arch of a burning brick kiln. No corn ever did or ever will taste like that. In winter, sliding down hill on sleds whittled out evenings by the kitchen fire. Making skates, the jackknife and gimlet of the boy could not compass. To raise money to buy them, the boy would occasionally get a job of some neighbor at 25 cents a day, or gather nuts and glean corn, which were sold to the store keeper. Some of the other games and sports have been handed down to the present generation.

The boy wore in winter stout cowhide shoes, misfitting spencer and trousers of homespun, cut and made by some Aunt Sophy or Aunt Orra, usually a world too wide, which if not things of beauty, were warm, and allowed free action of limb and lung; with a long woolen comforter wound about his neck and thick mother-knit mittens, he would exult in defying the weather and felt as much at home on the snow and ice as any polar bear. The overcoat and overshoes were unknown.

Of his summer rig the boy wore hardly enough on which to hang a description. Bare footed, with a shirt of coarse cotton, short trousers of tow cloth held up by a pair of gallows of his own knitting, one of which was usually missing; a straw hat minus a brim or a crown; and the toilet of the lad was complete

and satisfactory. If we add a sore finger tied up in a rag, a limp caused by stone bruise or a thorn, a freckled face, a sturdy frame, an honest eye and a respectful demeanor to the aged, we have a fair delineation of our trusted, hard-worked, happy subject.

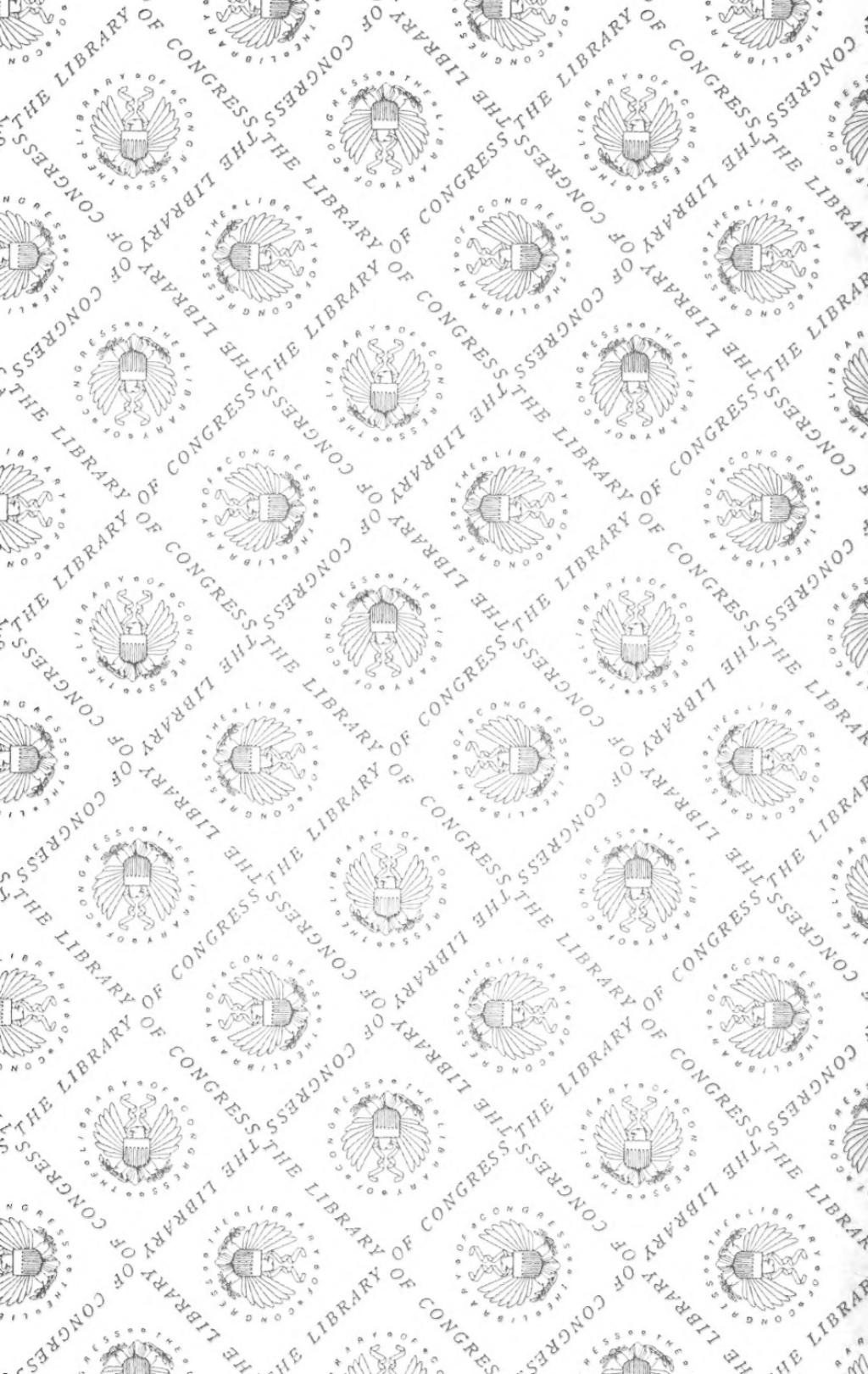
The youth of to-day, with his pale face, his spindle shanks, his tooth-pick

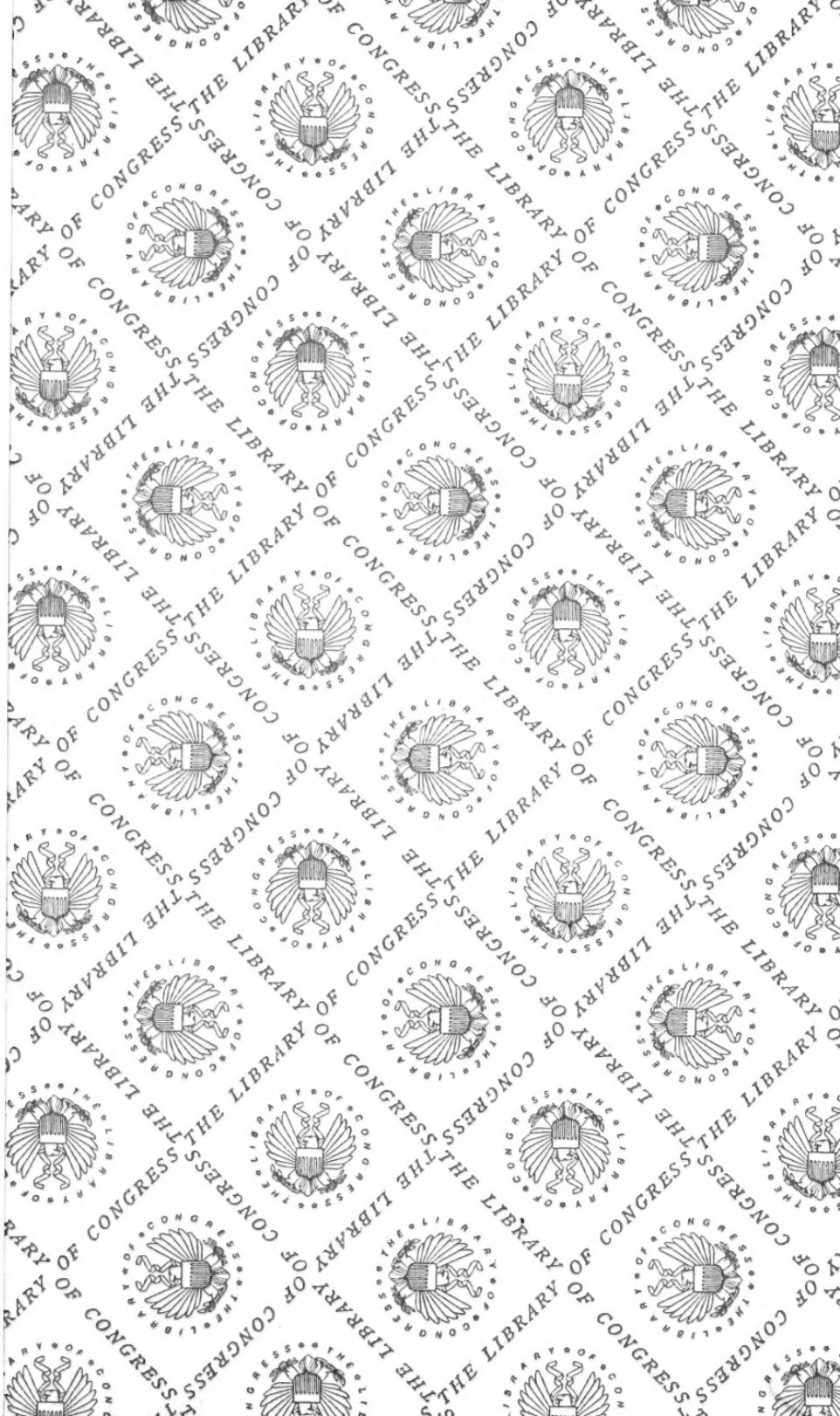
shoes, his store clothes, fancy colored shirt and necktie, his show of jewelry, his latin grammar and grown-up air, would not be recognized as a boy and a brother, by the boy of sixty years since.

So endeth this record of the passing of the stall-fed ox and the old-fashioned farm boy.



9
3





LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 003 192 338 4